

Genesis 38: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 February 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Genesis chapter 38. It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adolamite, whose name was Hira. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Ur. She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan.

Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Kezib when she bore him. And Judah took a wife for Ur, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Ur, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. Then Judah said to Onan, Go into your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother. But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother's wife, he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother.

And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter, Remain a widow in your father's house till Shelah my son grows up. For he feared that he would die like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father's house. In the course of time, the wife of Judah, Shelah's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheep shearers, he and his friend Hira the Adolamite. And when Tamar was told, Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep, she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage.

When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. He turned to her at the roadside and said, Come, let me come in to you. For he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, What will you give me that you may come in to me? He answered, I will send you a young goat from the flock. And she said, If you give me a pledge until you send it, he said, What pledge shall I give you? She replied, Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand. So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil, she put on the garments of her widowhood. When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adolamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her.

And he asked the men of the place, Where is the cult prostitute who was at Enaim at the roadside? And they said, No cult prostitute has been here. So he returned to Judah and said, I have not found her. Also the men of the place said, No cult prostitute has been here. And Judah replied, Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her. About three months later Judah was told, Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover she is pregnant by immorality. And Judah said, Bring her out, and let her be burned.

[3 : 1 4] As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant. And she said, Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.

Then Judah identified them and said, She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Sheila. And he did not know her again. When the time of her labour came, there were twins in her womb. And when she was in labour, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, This one came out first. But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out.

And she said, What a breach you have made for yourself. Therefore his name was called Perez. Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.

Genesis 38 is perhaps one of the most remarkable passages in the whole book of Genesis. Many people have dismissed it, regarding it as a later insertion into the text, interrupting the flow of the passage. So in chapter 37, verse 36, we read, Meanwhile, the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. And then you have the resumptive statement in chapter 39, verse 1. Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there.

Now it seems very strange that we would have this whole passage devoted to another story entirely, interrupting the drama of the Joseph narrative. What is it doing here? It seems to be a very odd thing in its context. Properly to understand the presence and purpose of this text, we probably need to consider the musical character of texts, the way that they're playing with particular themes, developing certain contrasts, and other things like that. And as we see what the text is doing on this front, it'll become more clear that it belongs exactly where it is. Joseph has just been sold down into Egypt, and Judah was the leader of the brothers in the plan to do so. Judah's plan presumed that Jacob would get over things fairly quickly, that Jacob would hear the news of his son's death, think of it as a great tragedy, mourn him for a few months, and then get over things with the love of his family. But yet that doesn't happen. Jacob is going to descend to his grave in mourning, indeed there are three stories of descent alongside each other. There's the descent of the father to the grave in mourning, there's the descent of Joseph into Egypt, and then there's the descent of Judah.

[5 : 55] And Judah descends from his brothers to a different location, maybe from the hill country to the plains, but then he also loses standing. He's no longer among his brothers anymore. He used to be the leader of his brothers, but perhaps after the failure of the plan, he is reduced to a lower status and to a certain degree of exile. And as we follow the passage through, we'll see a different sort of descent playing out as well. There are further connections between this passage and the passages surrounding it. There's been a deception of the father using a goat and a coat. We see a very similar thing in this story. There's another goat involved, there's another act of deception and disguise.

Judah is also being contrasted with the character of Joseph. In the next chapter, Joseph will resist the advances of Potiphar's wife, but here in this chapter, Judah goes into a prostitute. There are many parallels between these stories. In both cases, garments or items of possession are taken and later on presented as evidence. In Joseph's case, it's the garment that's taken from him and presented as evidence of his sexual advances to Potiphar's wife. And in the case of Judah, it's his signet, cord and staff. And there are further connections with the previous chapter as well. Judah has been involved in an act presenting tokens, seemingly of Joseph's death to his father, and says, please identify. At the end of this chapter, he's presented with tokens of his own sin and told, please identify. As we explore such connections, it will become more apparent why this text is here.

It's dealing with the themes of the surrounding texts. It's contrasting Joseph and Judah. And it's also presenting the consequences and the outworking of Judah's sin in the previous chapter, and showing how he might be involved in some sort of redemptive cycle. Judah descends from the brothers, and he loses his status and his honour, but he also loses a number of members of his family. He loses Ur, his oldest son. He loses Onan, his second oldest son. And then he ends up losing his wife as well, the daughter of Shua. Then after being consoled concerning her death, he has illicit relations with a seeming prostitute. And he's divested of personal items, which are later presented as evidence against him. We might recognise some patterns here. In some respects, Judah is playing out the pattern of Esau.

Esau was one who married a Canaanite. He despises his birthright, the tokens of his office and rule, and he's deceived in a way that leads him to give up his title. After the death of the wicked son, Onan fails to perform the duty of a brother-in-law to Tamar to raise up children for his brother.

And what happens is he violates and dishonours Tamar and his brother's memory. He refuses to have proper, completed sexual relations with her, and the result is that he is killed by the Lord in consequence of his sin. But yet, Tamar appears like a black widow character. And the truth, of course, is that Tamar isn't at fault. It's the sin of Ur and then the sin of Onan. But to Judah's mind, Tamar is responsible for the death of his oldest two sons, and he's in no hurry to give his youngest son, Shelah, to her. Judah's wife dies, and he is consoled. Now, you may think about some of the contrast here. His father lost a son and could not be consoled. And the previous chapter ended on this great note of mourning. But the chapter that follows is full of death, and yet the mourning seems to be fairly brief by comparison. In addition to the contrast, though, we may see some of the pattern of poetic justice playing out. A few chapters later, Reuben will say to his father, kill my two sons if I do not bring Benjamin back to you. Now, Judah is responsible for the death, or the seeming death, of Joseph, at least as his father understands the situation. And now, the chapter begins straight afterwards with him losing two of his own sons. Maybe we're supposed to see some poetic justice playing out here. Judah goes up to celebrate sheep shearing at Timna, and Tamar goes to Enaim, meaning two springs, and maybe there's an intertextual connection with

[10:23] Dothan, meaning two wells in the previous chapter. And she situates herself on the way to Timna at this particular location. Tamar seems to know that Judah will take the bait of a harlot. And this certainly does not commend his character to us. She doesn't seem to have to initiate anything on that front. And there's a strange part of this chapter where you have all these details of the negotiation with the harlot. The two-stage negotiation. First, payment with a pledge, and then the proper full payment when the pledge is restored. Now, why on earth would the author of Genesis give us all these details about negotiations with the harlot? It just seems strange. But yet it seems to be part of the point of the chapter. What has Tamar been waiting for? She's been waiting for Judah to give her a kid.

And we can see throughout the book of Genesis there are associations with children and kids. The kids should be presented, but there is no kid. In the previous chapter there was a kid, blood presented on the tunic to the father, and someone divested of personal items and a goat being used.

But Judah has failed to give her, Sheila, his youngest son. And so there's a certain poetry to what's taking place here as well. The kid should have been given to her, but no kid has been given.

Judah, as pledge, gives his seal, his cord, and his staff. And these are associated with signs of office. They're identifying items of his rule. You might compare them with his passport and his credit card, but there seems to be something a bit more than that going on here.

These are signs of authority, not just his ability to buy things and tokens of his identity. They're something that signify his office. As in the story of Jacob and Esau, this is a great despising of the birthright. In this episode, Judah, like his uncle Esau, readily gives up something that should be valued above everything else. And he despises his birthright in that respect.

[12 : 30] Let's step back and consider the movement of time in this passage. Indeed, the span of time covered in this passage is one of the most peculiar things about it, especially as it's interrupting a narrative in which there is no temporal break. Think about what happens. Judah goes down from his brothers.

He goes with Hiram the Odolamite, and he ends up marrying the daughter of Shua. He then has three sons by her, one after another, in different locations. Then his oldest reaches the age where he can marry, and then he marries Tamar. Then he dies. Then Onan takes Tamar. Then he dies. And then Sheila grows all the way up and is not given to Tamar. And then Judah's wife dies. He's consoled after her death.

And he goes up to Timna. Now, all of that span of time must take at least 40 years or so. And yet, it's in this particular point in the narrative. It seems very strange. But what we should be noticing is how quickly all this time is passing. About 40 years passing, just in the span of a few verses.

In a narrative where there is generally a lot of text given to fairly brief spans of time. Judah's house is dying, and he is wasting his life. And it takes the action of Tamar to interrupt this freefall. But not before bringing Judah down to his lowest point, the rock bottom point, where he gives away the last things that he really has to him. The goat that Judah sends in payment fails to reach its destination. And this seems to be part of the point, both of Tamar's plan and of the textual meaning. It is a symbolic playing out of Judah's sin from the previous chapter, and also of his failure to give Sheila to Tamar. After the fact that Tamar is pregnant is discovered, there is a rash judgment from Judah. Judah declares that she should be burnt. And Judah could cover up, but he confesses. It's a you-are-the-man moment. Tamar has been the scapegoat throughout the story to this point, but now she is finally vindicated. And Judah confesses. You should note that confession and praise are both associated with his name. And he receives back his tokens of identity. The same expression, please identify, that's used of the tokens of Joseph's identity in the previous chapter, and we should not miss the comparison. He gains two children, Perez and Zerah. He's lost two children at the beginning of the chapter. At the end of the chapter, he receives two sons back. And there's possible connection here with Tamar being found at Eneim, meaning two springs. The two twins are switched in order. The scarlet cord twin is replaced as the firstborn, the kid associated with the red color. Joseph's sons are also switched in order later in the story. This might make us think more about the story of Jacob and Esau. The seeming Esau character is not the first one out in this instance.

There's a reversing of that pattern. Other thing to notice, Perez or Peraz, breaking out, breaking away, pressing, etc., is a key term in the Jacob and David narratives. So Jacob breaks forth in a multitude, and he breaks away at the time of sheep shearing. In the story of Nabal, in chapter 25 of 1 Samuel, Nabal talks about all these people breaking away from their masters at the time of sheep shearing.

[15 : 59] Again, sheep shearing, and again, Peraz. In 2 Samuel chapter 13, Absalom presses, same verb, David and Amnon to go to the sheep shearing festival that he holds to avenge his sister, Tamar.

So there are all these different connections that are worth paying attention to. There are themes here that also fit in with the larger narrative of Joseph. There are sons lost, and there's collateral given to someone in disguise. Joseph is lost to Egypt, then Simeon is lost to Egypt, and Jacob must give Benjamin to the masked man in order to receive Simeon and Joseph back. In the same way, Judah must give Sheila to Tamar, give the kid to Tamar, in order to receive back the lost sons. So he gets two lost sons back at the end. Again, there's need for confession in order to receive that collateral back. The brothers have to confess their sin in order to receive back Simeon and Joseph. You can think of parallels with the story of Lot and his daughters, as they think that their father's line will die out in the world, and they take action to rectify the situation as they see it. Other things to note is women deceiving the serpent type figure. Judah is not the righteous person in this story, and he's deceived by his daughter-in-law. And that follows a pattern that we've seen more generally in scripture. Michael deceiving Saul, Rachel deceiving Laban, Jael deceiving Sisera, Haman being deceived by Esther. In each of these cases, there's a reversal of the pattern of the fall, where the woman was deceived by the serpent.

Now the serpents are being deceived by the woman. Other connections with biblical stories, we might think of the story of Rahab, the prostitute. Tamar dresses up as a prostitute. Jericho is called the city of palms and is burned with fire. Tamar means palm, and she's threatened with being burned with fire.

There's a scarlet thread in both stories. There's a scarlet thread associated with the window, and two spies rescued through it. Now is that connected with Tamar having two children? Perhaps. It's not one I've put a lot of emphasis upon, but it's a possibility. Think of the story of Ruth as well. Two dead sons and a dead spouse at the beginning of the story. Returning to a father's house. Returning to a mother's house in the case of Ruth. Returning to a father's house in the case of Tamar. Faithful women performing leveret marriage to restore a house that's been brought down to death. A young woman taking the place of an older woman, and an older man taking a place of a younger man. Children being too young to be given for leveret marriage. The failure of the near kinsman to do his duty. Ruth is the Moabites, a descendant of the woman who slept with her father to raise up seed and deliver the house of an unfaithful man from death. And the end of the book of Ruth foregrounds Tamar. May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah. So in all these ways, these stories are connected together. And the exact full picture of the connection escapes me. But there is very clearly something redemptive going on here.

That the story of Tamar is one that plays out later on in scripture. Tamar, in the story of David, is his daughter. She's associated with a multicolored coat. She suffers a terrible fate and remains in the house of Absalom. There are events at the time of sheep shearing. Absalom, like Judah, has three sons and a daughter called Tamar himself. So these stories are playing out again and again. Maybe think even of the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement begins in chapter 16 with the death of Nadab and Abihu, the death of the two sons, sending a goat by the hand of a suitable man. It's a day of mourning, in the same way as Judah's story is one of mourning. There's the divesting of Judah of his signs of office. The high priest is divested of his signs of office. There are twin goats, one distinguished by a scarlet cord within tradition. And you see that in William Holman Hunt's painting of the scapegoat. This would not probably be the first time that we encounter these themes in the book of Genesis. In Genesis chapter 21 and 22, you have two parallel stories. One kid being sent off into the wilderness by the hand of Hagar, and then one kid being presented on the mountain of the

[20 : 30] Lord, the Temple Mountain. It's a Day of Atonement pattern. See, the same thing in the story of Esau and Jacob. Two kids, one used to disguise Jacob as his brother Esau, and the other used as food for the stew. In that story, one of the brothers goes to the house of God and relates to God in that place where God goes up and down. And then the other brother is sent away from the fat of the land, into the wilderness, as it were. And so there are these Day of Atonement themes playing out in the story more generally. And the Day of Atonement is also a day of confession leading to restoration, which is what we see in the story of Judah. So I suspect there are connections here. It's worth thinking about. If you see anything more that fills these pictures out, please mention them to me, because I don't know how to fit all these pieces together, but they are exciting, I think.

Two questions to consider. First of all, what connections can you see between the story of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38 of Genesis and the story of Samson in Judges chapter 14 and 15?

And the second question. Why is Hira the Adolamite in the story? We don't read much about Adolam apart from the story of David. And Hira the Adolamite is this friend who appears in three episodes in the story, but he doesn't seem to have much significance beyond that. His role seems fairly incidental throughout, yet he's named on these three occasions. Do you have any idea what he's doing here?